

“Mad” Jack Morgan - California’s Forgotten Pirate
by
James T. Bartlett

In the last days of 1937, “Mad” Jack Morgan captured headlines across America, and everyone wanted to know everything about California’s very own pirate, mutineer and maritime murderer.

He “blazed the bloodiest yachting trail in Southern California history,” said the *Los Angeles Times* when it was reported that Morgan had met his death in exactly the way everyone might have imagined: he was attacked by his prisoners, and thrown overboard to be eaten by sharks.

The rip-roaring tale of terror had begun on the serene waters around Santa Catalina Island, some 20 miles or so off the coast of Los Angeles, when 45-year-old Morgan chartered the 58-foot former racing schooner *Aaffe* from Santa Barbara hotel owner Dwight L. Faulding.

Morgan hired Faulding as skipper, and said he was planning a two-day pleasure cruise with his pregnant 17-year-old wife Lillian. Also on the trip was Faulding’s fiancée Gertrude Turner and her 8-year-old son Robert, plus Faulding’s long-term crew employee Robert Horne. Former high school football star George Spernak, 19, and 21-year-old nurse Elsie Berdan, who was to look after Lillian, rounded out the ocean-going party.

They set sail on December 20 from Long Beach, and it wasn’t until they were several days overdue that Berdan’s sister raised the alarm. She told police that Elsie had been kidnapped by Morgan, and this allegation bought the FBI into the case.

On December 30, it was reported that a naval plane had spotted the letters SOS on the sail of the *Aaffe*, which was 180 miles south of Long Beach or, in some reports, “drifting 300 miles off the coast of Mexico.”

Coast Guard cutter *Perseus* was dispatched, and they found the *Aaffe*’s mainsail broken and the engine out of fuel. They began towing the blood-stained vessel back to Long Beach, and an FBI agent took a motorboat to meet the “yacht of death.”

The passengers were hungry and shaken, but otherwise unhurt – and both Faulding and Jack Morgan were missing. What had happened?

On New Year’s Eve, the public learned the sensational truth.

Just off Catalina, Faulding and Morgan got into an argument and Morgan shot his captain in the shoulder. Wincing in pain, Faulding tried to cool things down, saying: “Be a good fellow and put that gun away. We’re all out for a good time.”

Unsurprisingly, he then went to get his .38, but when Morgan appeared on the stairs above him, he opened fire. Morgan shot back five times, hitting Faulding in the heart and killing him instantly.

Morgan ordered Faulding's body weighted with an anchor and thrown overboard, closed the yacht's hatches, and locked the passengers in their cabins. Over the next few days, he roughed up the men, withheld food, and grandly assumed the role of captain. He talked of his wild plans to head for the South Seas, raiding ports for supplies en route.

On Christmas Eve, the swashbuckling Spernak and Horne saw their chance for freedom, and attacked Morgan. Horne beat him with a wooden marlin spike, and then the pair threw him over the side too, probably not caring that sharks would be attracted by his bleeding injuries.

Whether Morgan was alive when he hit the water was never revealed, but the "Mad Pirate" was now deep in Davy Jones' Locker, and Spernak and Horne were arrested as soon as they set foot back on land. Waiting in the crowd were members of the Faulding family, who had expected to collect Dwight's body for burial; they left in tears.

Lillian Morgan, her head bandaged, was held as a material witness too, and a grand jury was assembled.

Charged with murder on the high seas, the two young men were going to plead self-defense and remanded overnight in the County Jail, but no one thought the case would even come to trial, especially when nurse Elsie told reporters that Morgan was "the cruelest man I ever knew."

She also said that Lillian had tried to restrain her husband, but he treated her "inhumanely," forcing her to hold everyone at gunpoint when he wanted to sleep, and threatening to kill her if she refused. Elsie added that Morgan made "improper advances to her, bordering on the erotic."

Spernak and Horne had led the attempt to sail back to Long Beach, and were duly unanimously freed by the grand jury – as was Lillian Morgan.

Tall and handsome with a pencil mustache, Morgan had a colorful past. Born in Nicaragua to French and German parents as Jean Dee Barnette, he had come to with them to California as a child, and ran away to sea soon after. He worked on vessels around the world – when he wasn't spending years behind bars.

He had convictions for sexual assault, burglary and petty theft, and had only been released from San Quentin Prison earlier in 1937, soon after which he and Lillian had eloped from New Orleans. Lillian's father had not heard from her since that day – until now.

Time magazine wrote a detailed summary of events, and the *Los Angeles Times* wondered if Morgan was related to the infamous Sir Henry Morgan, who terrorized the Spanish Main in the 17th century (and inspired the famous rum).

The story was even covered as far away as Australia, which might explain why Tasmanian-born actor Errol Flynn, who was famous for playing a pirate called *Captain Blood*, became intrigued by its “melodramatic” past, and was rumored to have considered buying the *Aaffje*.

Flynn was a noted sailor too, and the *Aaffje* did have a successful racing history. In 1924 the *Aaffje*, helmed by then-owner Roy Milsap, came second in a 100-mile dash. Bizarrely, not only was the race around Catalina Island, but the winning skipper was called Morgan Adams (though it was not the same pirate-to-be).

The oceangoing community is a superstitious one though, and after it became known as a pirate ship, some said that the *Aaffje* was cursed. Just a few months after it was splashed across the headlines, it was sold at government auction in July 1938 for a knock-down price of nearly \$7,000. There had been a long-standing lawsuit related to the vessel, and it had been seized by the IRS as soon as the FBI and police had finished with it.

The next and last owner of the *Aaffje* was screenwriter John Taintor Foote (*The Story of Seabiscuit*), and he found his new vessel involved in another tragedy just over a year later in 1939.

While it was moored in Santa Monica, A. Grimstead, the young boat keeper for Taintor Foote, lit a cigarette and accidentally caused a bilge gas explosion and fire. He was badly burned, as was lifeguard Lt. Robert Butt, who helped get Grimstead to an ambulance and then returned to fight the fire.

A Harbor Patrol boat and two other private vessels joined in the effort, perhaps a dozen men overall, but then several more explosions “tossed them like matchwood,” and saw two of the men thrown overboard. Three more were injured, and with damaged estimated at \$5,000, this was probably the spectacular end for the *Aaffje*.

By that time though, the fire was just a local story. World War II had broken out in Europe, and the *Aaffje* and the terrible story of “Mad” Jack Morgan sailed quietly into history.

ENDS
1229w